

County to accept \$2.75 million for victims

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Lincoln County government is headed toward managing \$2.75 million settlement intended to meet health care needs of victims of asbestos-related disease.

Local officials, health care providers and asbestos victims advocates had initially thought the county was ineligible to receive the settlement money, and discussions were focusing on forming a nonprofit corporation to manage the funds. But in a telephone conference on

Friday, Environmental Protection Agency attorney Matthew Schindler indicated that the county may be able to take the funds after all.

"Right now, I don't see a barrier to the county participating in this," Schindler said.

W.R. Grace is to provide the money for health care as part of an agreement to settle an access dispute with the Environmental Protection Agency. Under the terms of the settlement, a local nonprofit entity must be approved by Grace and the U.S. Department of

Justice to manage the money.

The money is to be used for health care needs not met by Grace's existing medical plan. Costs that could be met using money from the settlement

include tests for people exposed to asbestos but not diagnosed with any asbestos-related disease and long-term nursing home care for asbestos victims.

The Lincoln County Community Health Center had been under consideration to manage the money, but the board decided last week to decline the offer. Other possibilities that had been

proposed included an asbestos victims group and a reorganized version of the hospital's Center for Asbestos Related Disease as well as a completely new board made up of people representing various interests.

The settlement has been approved by a bankruptcy court and is ready to be returned to a federal judge in Missoula for his signature. The judge's signature starts a 10-day timeline during which a nonprofit entity must come forward to

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accept the money.

The U.S. Justice Department will probably agree to hold off on submitting the paperwork to the judge for a while to allow local officials to get organized, Cohn said, but they may not want to delay the process for too long.

"I know they are willing to

wait," he said. "The question is, how long?"

County Commissioner John Konzen told Cohn the county might be the best choice to manage the money.

"That may be the easiest and most applicable place for it to go," he said.

A private nonprofit corporation might be the best choice for managing the money in the long run, but for the time being the funds should go to the county, said county health officer Brad Black.

"We're going to need some mechanism," he said. "I think the county may be the best to bring the community together to figure out how to disburse funds."

Asbestos victims advocate Gayla Benefield agreed that allowing the county to take the money would be preferable to trying to organize a new board on short notice.

"It takes care of a great big headache is the thing," she said.